

Dear The Standing Committee on Environment and Planning,

I am writing to make a submission into the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. My name is Robbie Belchamber, I am a 23 year old university graduate who works part-time as a musician/guitar teacher and part-time in a call-centre. I have always had a passion for the outdoors and environment; I often enjoy bike riding, hiking and camping in my spare time, I volunteer with community environment groups such as Wildlife Of The Central Highlands (WOTCH) and have previously worked as a fundraiser for The Wilderness Society. As a young person, I believe the decline of our ecosystems is one of the greatest challenges my generation is facing, and will continue to face, throughout my lifetime. These issues will continue to be exacerbated by a warming and drier climate in Victoria and globally. To create substantive change on this issue, we must act immediately, effectively, and for the long-term.

The 2018 Victorian State of The Environment report found the status of only 11% of the report's scientific indicators was "good", and only 10% were improving (<https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/SoE-2018-summary-report.pdf>). After our devastating bushfires last summer I would not be surprised if these figures are now far worse. Commissioner Dr Gillian Sparkes goes on to talk of moving beyond traditional methods, stating that a "business-as-usual approach to developing policies, programs and an ad hoc investment in monitoring, science and reporting is unlikely to meet our requirements for effective, adaptive management practices into the future". She goes on to state how governments must build capacity and *harness citizen science*. I have had immensely positive experiences participating in citizen science with WOTCH and the ANU's Stagwatching. Feeling like I am having some kind of positive impact on issues which are critical to my future helps my mental wellbeing hugely. Currently our national parks and reserves receive less than 0.5% of state government expenditure, and this needs to increase dramatically. Yet in reality, it still seems the amount of labour hours required to monitor and manage our environment to a truly optimal standard would really push the budget of any government. Therefore finding ways to engage communities in citizen science is not only essential to the task itself, but I believe would also have further positive impacts around mental health and community cohesion. The needs to be creative solutions to these issues - work for the dole schemes could also be redesigned to meet address these needs and new "green armies" established.

In addressing all areas of ecosystem decline, the Committee must wherever possible allow the solutions to be led by indigenous voices and knowledge. The most apparent area for me is the use of cultural fire. The devastation caused over summer was immense, and highlighted how poor land management, a lack of moisture in the landscape and climate change are creating the perfect storm for natural and ecological disasters. I am definitely no expert on the matter, but have attended a talk from Wurundjeri fire Elder Uncle Dave Wandin at university and reading the book "Fire Country" by traditional fire practitioner Victor Steffenson I am convinced more MUST be done than our current "business as usual" approach to engaging traditional practices or our efforts will certainly fail. This seems to be especially true in the area of fire, but applies to all aspects of our land and water management.

In conclusion I would like to summarise a few key points I believe are essential to success in this area:

- Indigenous voices must be centered in all solutions in this area
- Funding must be increased to land and water management programs
- Policy needs to be modern and progressive, and move beyond traditional methods of the field
- Climate change **MUST** also be addressed as it is a key compacting factor on so many other issues. Increasing Victoria's fossil fuel (mainly gas) extraction is not conducive to this - and I was shocked that the Victorian Gas Program Progress Report No.4 did not even consider the emissions created by exporting fossil fuels. We must consider our environmental issues holistically
- Government must seek to increase jobs in this field
- Government must seek to engage communities and citizen's *beyond* these professional areas
- Any solutions must be adaptable to future outcomes and environmental indicators

I believe the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity for the government to fund a green economic recovery. This must be done urgently and long-term focused.

Kind Regards,  
Robert Belchamber

